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THE SOCIAL LIFE OF CHILDREN¹

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Nothing more beneficent has come into modern education than the tendency to obliterate the distinctions between a child's school life and the other aspects of his life. Our debt is incalculable to those great teachers who have seen, and have taught us to see, that the whole life of the child is social, that the whole life of the child is educational—that it should be one harmonious piece of experience, flowing naturally on from home to school, from family to friends and teachers, with no jars and no segmentation. We cannot fail to see that in the large sense of "social," all life is social where people—even two people—are adjusting themselves to one another and co-operating in living. We have all learned to see too that ideally, social pleasure, like every other pleasure, should arise out of normal and natural activities—should come as a by-product, an efflorescence, of our association with our fellows in some interest or activity. This is why we find the best society in Chicago at Hull House, in the studios, in the morning conferences at the club, rather than at the afternoon tea, or the formal reception, where we go seeking pleasure.

It would, then, be quite ideal if it were possible to associate the child's social experience inseparably and joyously with his

¹ The substance of this paper was given as an informal talk before the Educational Department of the Chicago Woman's Club. Moved by pressure, apparently sincere, from many friends, and by the kind urgency of the editor of *The Elementary School Teacher*, I have written it out from my notes, well knowing that it has not by that process been transformed into a magazine article, but remains by nature an informal talk. I claim for it no originality. It is merely a practical presentation of ideas and hopes gathered from many sources—ideas and hopes that have been discussed so many times with friends, especially Dr. and Mrs. Dewey, Mr. MacClintock, and Mrs. Harding, that I cannot by any means tell what is mine among them and what is theirs. If any of them, or of the many others to whom I am indebted, chance to see this paper, let them claim their own property, if they can recognize it.

school experience and his family life. The family and the school, well and liberally organized, wisely and generously conducted, should, ideally, so fill the child's life that there would not be vacancies left to fill with society as society. But the home and the school are not well and liberally organized, nor wisely and generously conducted. Many homes are barren, either poverty-stricken or slipshod, and are therefore unsocial; many homes are luxurious, elaborate, filled with an atmosphere of servants and functionaries, and are therefore antisocial. The school life of the children, especially of the older children, but running back far into the elementary school too, is professionalized and technicalized, made into mere learning and not living, built around an elaborate and unsparing system of competition, until it is not only both unsocial and antisocial, but scarcely human.

So, however unwilling we are that it should be so, we must acknowledge that the recreative out-of-school life of our children has been erected into a sort of institution, modeled upon adult "society," having its own machinery, its ceremonies and events. It is this specialized recreation, as distinguished from home life and from school life, that we must handle, gently and gradually transforming it, if possible, into the thing we should like it to be.

Each school and each home has its own problems to deal with in this as in other matters. It is in these matters of specific detail that the problems become acute and vexatious. When we talk in general about the social life of children, we are obliged to handle it in so large a way as to seem well-nigh unaware of the specific individual problems. But there are a few fundamental principles everywhere applicable, in the light of which the difficulties that inhere in special situations and minor details grow smaller or disappear. It is comforting and reassuring to talk together over these principles and their application.

The first principle of the social life of our children is that it should be democratic. There are reasons of several different kinds for this. In our day everybody that is not a democrat pretends to be. It is a pose, where it is not a sincere attitude. Bernard Shaw says being a revolutionist saves a man from being bored; so posing as a social democrat saves many a modern

man and woman from ennui. It gets one the pleasantest possible introductions to the most distinguished people. It forms a base from which one may launch the newest and most knowing irony and satire at the established order of things. We have quite reversed the witticism of the man who said he preferred to vote with the Whigs and live with the Tories, so that, however piously we may vote with the conservatives, we like to live or to be known to live, with the social democrats. So many of us are obliged merely to pose as democrats for the reason that the last few generations of Americans have been so strenuously trying to forget that as Americans we are democratic, and have been so laboriously taking on the airs and customs of the aristocracy that we find ourselves, now that democracy is in fashion, actually embarrassed with those notions of exclusiveness that we and our fathers, and in some cases our grandfathers, assiduously cultivated. But the society of the future—that future for which we are rearing our children and our children's children—will, if we are wise and honest now, be really democratic. It will not be necessary for them to pose. Of course, we can never have again the old democracy of ignorance and inexperience; but our children's children will see a better thing—a reasoned, conscious, artistic, religious democracy, far on the road toward the brotherhood of man.

The best of it is that children are natural democrats. Until it is pointed out to them by their elders, they make no discriminations on the ground of extraneous characteristics against other children who happen to be interesting to them. Now, the basis of this society for our children is providentially and most naturally provided in the school. It is here and only here that many sorts of children from many kinds of homes come together freely and naturally, as mates and equals. Here they meet upon an impartial footing. Here, quite as it should be in an ideal democracy, they must learn to know and respect one another's qualities, regardless of the accidents of manners and appointments.

But before we can do much to foster and extend this charming social condition we must free ourselves from certain ideals that have long loomed large within our own social and domestic hori-

zons, which have, indeed, seemed to many people — sentiment-intoxicated men and timorous women — the very beacon lights of human society. It would require a very Ibsen to reveal to us all the harm these high-sounding, enthusiastically supported ideals are capable of doing. The first of them is expressed in the phrase “the sanctity of home,” or some such. When this means, as it may so easily do, the selfish exclusiveness that leads us to shut up ourselves and our children with a very few chosen friends within a refined and closed circle, and to shut out all others not refined and selected, then it means that the home is not co-operating with the other institutions for the bringing in of the divine brotherhood; that it stands as a bar, a block in the road of advance. Now, I will not be misunderstood as an iconoclast who would crassly tear down the true sanctities and privacies of home. Neither will I lie for a moment under the more galling imputation of promulgating that bit of evangelical sentimentalism that would advise us to invite into our homes “the poor” or “the uncultivated,” that we may comfort and enlighten them with glimpses of refinement. Nor would I tolerate for a moment the idea that we should train our children to extend charity or social favors to those “beneath” them. Nay! ideally we are training our children for the social day when snobs and philanthropists will be equally superfluous and equally unacceptable, because equality and justice (plain as they sound) will have rendered them both impossible.

This charitable and philanthropic prepossession will be the very hardest to shake off. But we must do it, and invite into our homes these friends our children make in the school or in the settlement, as friends and equals. And they always give more than they get. Though, of course, the courteous and generous home is a vital glowing center whose sanctities are not hidden, but active, fearing no violation or contamination; and it does dignify and cultivate its guests.

Another ideal which we must modify or let slip is that of the sacredness of our children’s manners and morals. Many a mother builds up for herself a delusion on these points — an image based upon cant phrases and mere sentiment, of the little paragon she desires her child to be; and, with a cruelty and narrowness of

which only the idealistic mother is capable, she labors for years to produce him. She forgets that manners superimposed are hypocrisy, that morals unchosen and untempted are also unsafe. Now, again, I refuse to be understood as approving or applauding a rude or vicious child, or as advising people to let their children grow up savages. Only a newspaper reporter could so misinterpret my statements. But I do insist that the child should have a right to make some of his manners to suit his own occasions, and a right to choose sometimes in the matter of his morals. Further, as in the case of the home, if we are bringing up our children aright, we shall have fortified them against much contamination before they are exposed to it. We shall have made of them dynamic forces for good, not left them helpless victims of evil influences.

We must teach them to look below the mere surface rudenesses and coarsenesses of children they are obliged to know, as we must do in our own world, to the real person beneath. Children are, as a rule, much keener sighted in this than we are. If ever you sympathetically investigated some "undesirable" friend your child had picked up, to whom his soul seemed to cleave, you have pretty certainly found that behind the disreputable sweater was a big human heart; that the grimy little paws knew how to do interesting things; that there was a reality, a pungency, a "ginger" in this small democrat that you, and certainly your child, never found in the patent-leather-shod friends he met at the dancing-school. It is a criminal thing to blind and defeat this power of insight in a child, and lead him to choose his friends by their appointments and their mamma's street numbers. And we must ourselves learn to look more lightly at the more superficial manifestations of manners, morals, and speech, and not to fall into a flutter at the appearance of undesirable symptoms in our own children, as if they argued incurable contamination. Speech too good, manners too perfect, make a pariah of a child in the playing-field. He knows this, and it is a sad day when he consciously adopts one code for "the kids" and another for his mamma's four-o'clock tea. I have heard an epigram, which like all epigrams, is not more than nine-tenths extravagance or flippancy: "Every boy from seven to twelve is either a pig or a

prig, with this difference—the pig is curable.” To be a true social democrat, and to bring up our children as such, we must lay by some of our fears for the frailty of their manners and morals, and must cultivate a simpler, heartier ideal, so that we can tolerate in our homes and as playfellows with our children many other people’s children whose speech and manners we ourselves have not formed.

We should welcome heartily the tendency everywhere visible to make more of the schoolhouse and the interests of school as a social center. It would be quite ideal if the school were a sort of children’s club, or if attached to every school, or within every school district, there were a children’s club-house and playing-fields where the children came together in some interest not strictly disciplinary—dramatic work, music, physical culture, exhibits of their collections. All such interests afford sane and wholesome reasons for social communion. Behind every school there should be an association of parents and friends of children, unobtrusively active, making practical and safe such social possibilities, and at the same time immeasurably enriching their own social experience.

Of course, every child is entitled to his own inner circle of friends—those congenial spirits whom he asks to family festivals, with whom he spends long afternoons in the solitude of two or three or four. But he could easily and profitably have this larger contact with many kinds of children, if we only had the facilities for utilizing the opportunities of school.

Our children’s social life, however it may express itself, should be organized and conducted with simplicity. By this we mean, first, simplicity as opposed to complexity. The business of the child up to his second year in high school, and perhaps beyond, is that of acquiring in a single-minded, leisurely way the broad, fundamental things of knowledge and character. But just as this fact is ignored in most schools, and the children are found “fussed” and distracted with minor matters of subject and technique, so it is ignored in the home, and the children, like the parents, are loaded with engagements and social duties. We owe it to our children to secure to them their long childhood. We

should passionately keep for them their leisure, their long hours of time. We cannot too much deplore the restlessness some people feel to have their children experience all there is of life. It is deplorable to thrust a child untimely into a mature experience, and forestall or force the beautiful ripeness of each stage of his life. To take the child to the theater—the theater “as is”—to grand opera, to concerts where he hears difficult music psychologically twenty years beyond him, to evening parties, is to wrong him mentally, morally, physically, socially. There should be drama for children; there should be many more of the concerts for young people, which Mr. Thomas knows so well how to arrange; but the children should not be thrust into artistic and social experiences suitable only for their elders. Above all, they should be spared as long as possible the appalling complexity, the depressing too-much, which makes the lives of their elders one ignoble scramble, or a constant series of volitional upheavals of choice-making.

We mean, in the second place, simplicity as opposed to costliness. Well-to-do and experienced people know that there can never be any true democracy among the children or elsewhere, so long as they flaunt the signs of their difference—fine clothes, much spending-money, luxurious appointments. Everybody knows, however, that this is a delicate and difficult question. Clothes should be good and serviceable and tasteful. Unfortunately, the matter of their tastefulness is partly a matter of fabrics and materials, in which we are in the hands of the manufacturers, who seem to have agreed to do their worst for us in making cheap materials as undesirable as possible in color and design. Here, indeed, is a legitimate crusade demanding the eloquence and enthusiasm of some eloquent and enthusiastic woman's club.

But it is not so difficult to know where “finery” and indulgence begin, and it is the artistic ugliness and the immorality of finery and indulgence that balk education and estop democracy. It is indulgence and luxury, the offensive too-much, that set a man or a child apart spiritually from his fellows, and make him a social leper, shunned and infectious. Any woman with even a little wisdom can, if she will, arrive at a standard of relative—

yes, of absolute — uncostliness, and apply it. She can at least refuse to subject her boys and girls to the frivolous, the criminal, observances of the changing fashions. Many an unfortunate child, in her dress, her parties, her very toys, is merely a “conspicuous consumer” for her mother; she demonstrates that her mamma “knows how.” To this cheap triumph, this selfish and trivial pleasure, many a woman sacrifices her child’s peace and harmonious growth, and places a barrier to a true social life. We have all seen children returning from what ought to have been a simple, naïve child’s festival — a birthday party, perhaps — loaded with dollars’ worth of favors and prizes and place-cards, but, worse still, loaded with the bitterest burden one has to bear, that of a social *duty*, a competitive hospitality. Such things as this all parents can examine with a fresh access of consciousness and of conscience, and arrive for themselves at a standard of true simplicity.

We mean, in the third place, simplicity as opposed to artificiality. For us grown-up people ceremonies and social technicalities have a certain place. With the world clamoring at the telephone and the door-bell and the letter-box, we are forced to hedge about our leisure and our privacy with sundry difficulties of access. With so many people to meet and meetings to attend, we are obliged to establish a certain technique for the mere ease of doing it. Of course, we know, too, that we can never have again the unconscious and unsuspecting simplicity of a primitive society. Whatever simplicity we win for ourselves must be, like our democracy itself, the result of conscious, reasoned conclusion, the fruit of experienced taste. Can we not spare our children as much as possible of the technicalities of social communion, permit them to enjoy, as one of the privileges of the American, the very minimum of professional etiquette? As much as fine clothes, the manners and customs of a conventional society shut in the adepts and shut out the uninitiated. If we are sincere in our desire to help our children to the advantages and privileges of a new social democracy, we must see that these barriers are not erected. The very stronghold and college of conventional and artificial manners and practices is the dancing-school. Therefore we find all

serious mothers reacting against the regulation dancing-school. Dancing the children should have. But it should be taught in the school as physical culture, or in little friendly classes in the home — always under natural, simple, untechnical circumstances, in the care, or under the eye of some one who knows psychology enough to choose real children's dances, and sociology enough to prevent the undemocratic degradation of the girls and the antisocial exaltation of the boys. No proficiency or expertness in manners is worth making this sacrifice for.

These principles—a true conscious democracy, simplicity in all its aspects applied under the joyous and loving guidance of parents and teachers—will go far toward securing for our children a sound and promising social life.